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ABSTRACT

In January 1980, TVOntario, a television network operated by the Ontario Educational Communications Authority, introduced a new concept in adult learning, the TVOntario Academy. It consists of a combination of high broadcast-quality television programming, a computer-managed learning (CML) system, and especially designed courseware aimed at enabling TVOntario viewers the opportunity of embarking upon self-directed learning projects on subjects related to the television series. The basic component of a TVOntario Academy is a carefully selected, or especially produced, series of television programs which covers a well-defined and clearly circumscribable body of knowledge. The first two projects were a Health and the Environment Academy and a Music of Man Academy: Parents' Academy will be offered in January 1981. Resources and support materials usually consist of a learners' guide, reading materials, multiple-choice questions, CML system, and newsletters. Findings of an evaluation of the two academies presented provided information about motivations of participants. Appeal and convenience of a television-based learning activity were cited. (YLB)

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The use of television broadcasting and computer-managed learning for individualized adult learning

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In January 1980, TVOntario launched two important experiments in which a computer-managed learning system (CML) played a major role. In general, the results of the experiments were very favourable, leading to further activities involving the use of the CML system and to some interesting plans for the future.

But what is TVOntario, why is it interested in CML, and what were the experiments all about?

TVOntario is a television network operated by the Ontario Educational Communications Authority (OECA), a crown corporation of the Province of Ontario, Canada. The network consists of nine television stations which can reach approximately 85% of the over eight million people living in the Province. The normal TVO broadcast day is about 16 hours. Its programming is also transmitted through many cable channels across the Province. TVO programs are also available on videotapes to all educational institutions, libraries, and other non-profit community organizations for a nominal fee.

The OECA is a broadcasting organization and not an educational institution per se. While it makes a major contribution to formal education by supporting -- through broadcasting, as well as videotape and cable distribution -- teaching programs of schools, colleges, and universities of the Province, its educational services to the general public, or as we often call it, to the "open sector," are of a rather informal nature. TVOntario does not offer on its own behalf any credit courses; it does not formally evaluate the learning progress of its viewers, nor does it offer any official recognition of achievement for participating in a learning project. In actuality,

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however, it does offer a variety of meaningful learning opportunities which help many individuals in broadening their intellectual horizons, provide for cultural enrichment, and for the acquisition of knowledge and skills in various subject areas.

Studies carried out by the Research Division of the OECA in recent years on the needs and interests in learning among the general public* indicate a growing demand among adults for learning in subject matter areas and in teaching/learning situations which are not easily available through formal education institutions. Distance from educational institutions, inability to leave home, lack of time, dislike or fear of formal schedules and exams, fears of failure, etc., are among the reasons why a considerable proportion of those who feel a need for learning do not actively participate in any organized learning activity. TVOntario felt, therefore, that new ideas and efforts should be tried out to meet the needs of this significant segment of the population.

We knew that with television broadcasting we can reach a considerable number of people. We knew also that high quality television programming and accompanying materials such as publications, audio tapes, learning kits, etc., can be a rich and attractive learning resource. However, the provision of learning resources is only a part of an effective teaching/learning process. We were looking for means which would enable -- without employing a regular staff of teachers, tutors, or instructors, like other educational institutions -- a degree of individualization of the learning process and which would

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*See, among others: I. Waniewicz, Demand for Part-Time Learning in Ontario. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, for The Ontario Educational Communications Authority, 1976; I. Waniewicz, "Development of Television Series in Support of Distance Learning Courses to be Offered by Some Ontario Universities and Colleges: Progress Report." Office of Planning and Development, The Ontario Educational Communications Authority, 1979 (mimeographed); I. Waniewicz, T. Notar, "A Planning Framework for the Development of OECA Programs in Support of Non-formal Learning of Adults Through Libraries and Ys." Office of Planning and Development, The Ontario Educational Communications Authority, May 1979 (mimeographed).

make it possible to reach larger numbers of learners on a personal basis. We wanted to find economic and efficient ways of maintaining continuous contact with learners throughout the duration of a television-based learning project for the purpose of counseling, encouraging, motivating, correcting, informing, etc.

In January 1980, TVOntario introduced a new concept in adult learning, the TVOntario Academy. It consists of a combination of high broadcast-quality television programming, a computer-managed learning system, and especially designed courseware aimed at enabling TVOntario viewers the opportunity of embarking upon self-directed learning projects on subjects related to the television series.

Viewers who express an interest in undertaking this type of learning with the help of TVOntario are provided with learning guidance and advice. They are helped in formulating their learning goals and interests. One of the main features of the project is that the learners are given the opportunity to respond to frequent and systematic sets of especially designed questions and exercises aimed at providing further clarification of concepts, intellectual stimulation, as well as an opportunity for self-evaluation. Thanks to the use of the CML system, the learners receive individualized feedback to their responses. This feedback takes into account not only their choice of answer and outcome of the exercise, but also their learning goals and interests, their educational background, occupation, the geographic areas they are living in, etc.

The duration of the learning projects so far initiated within the framework of the TVOntario Academy ranges from eight to 14 weeks. The first two projects were: a 14-week Health and the Environment Academy and an eight-week Music of Man Academy. In January 1981, a third Academy will be launched, a 12-week Parents' Academy.

How Does The Academy Work?

The basic component of a TVOntario Academy is a carefully selected, or especially produced, series of television programs which covers a well-defined and clearly circumscribable body of knowledge. As the basic clientele of a TVOntario Academy are individual viewers in their homes, who, in many cases, would not have initiated the undertaking of a learning project on their own without prompting, the television series has to be an attractive production of professional quality. The Health and Environment Academy is based on a series produced by TVOntario in cooperation with the inter-university Educational Council on Health and the Environment. The 14 half-hour documentaries focus on health concerns ranging from processed food to species survival. The issues are discussed from an environmental and interactional perspective, which stresses the increasing demands that modern technology has placed on the human body and the role lay people play in health matters. The Music of Man Academy, on the other hand, is based on eight one-hour programs produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in association with the Mississippi Authority for Educational Television, and the Ontario Educational Communications Authority, written and narrated by Yehudi Menuhin. The programs provide a unique panorama of the world of sound, and present the musical traditions

of five continents, with performances by many of the world's distinguished artists. No television series of this nature has been undertaken before.

The television series is, then, serving as the initial stimulus for learning. The broadcasting of the series is the starting point in offering the public a chance to embark upon a deliberate learning effort. When the plans to broadcast the series are announced, we are telling the public that this could be for many individuals a good opportunity to engage in a learning experience of their own from which they can gain considerably more than just watching a television program.

In order to enable the provision of such a meaningful experience, the organizers of each Academy have to develop a variety of resources and support materials which are significant components of the Academy. They usually consist of:

- A Learrer's Guide. The purpose of such a publication is to describe the overall educational goal of the series, as well as the educational objectives of each particular unit of learning. A learning unit is a portion of learning activities built around each of the television programs of the series broadcast in weekly intervals. The guide contains the date and time of the broadcasts and their repeats, calendars of related events which will take place in the geographic area near the learner's place of residence, advice on other activities, like field trips, exercises, etc. It also contains a listing of public libraries, or other institutions, where reading materials can be made available and where, in many cases, the video-tapes of the series would be available for individual viewing.

- Reading materials, usually in the form of especially written essays from 5-15 pages, to accompany each program. In addition, lists of recommended readings are developed for the series as a whole, as well as for the particular learning units, aimed mainly at the more advanced participants.

- The multiple-choice questions. For each learning unit, sets of multiple-choice questions are developed. The function of these questions is not so much the evaluation of the learner's progress as to serve as a basic learning resource and as a backbone for an active interchange between the Academy and its participants. The questions are designed to involve the participants intellectually, to stimulate their curiosity and to continuously sustain their interest.

- The computerized system of learning management enables the development of feedback to the responses which the participants send in to the questions. The purpose of this feedback, in addition to serving as an important channel of resource information, is to clarify particular concepts, to stimulate further inquiry, to advise on related activities, and to help participants contact each other for possible group meetings and discussions.

  The CML system used by the Academy enables to a considerable degree the individualization of the feedback. Each participant can receive from the Academy comments and suggestions which will take into account not only his or her choice of a given alternative in each of the questions, but also the personal learning goals and interests, as stated in the registration forms filled out at the moment of enrolment, the educational background of the participant,

his or her occupation, geographic location, etc. This individualized feedback to participants is one of the main features of the Academy providing for personalized contact with each participant throughout the duration of the learning experience.

- Newsletters, an important means of exchange of experience and observations between Academy participants.

Highlights of Evaluation Findings

The findings of an evaluation of the Health and Environment Academy and the Music of Man Academy carried out by the Project Research section of the OECA provide interesting information about the motivations of people who decided to participate in the Academies, as well as about their perception of the learning process and effects. Here are some highlights of the findings.

- The geographic distribution of the participants reflected very closely the actual population distribution throughout the Province.

- Among reasons for enroling in the Academies, over 40% of the participants indicated that the idea of a television-based learning experience appealed to them.

- When asked about the reason for participating in a television-based learning activity rather than any other type of course, the largest number of respondents chose the replies "It is a convenient way to learn" and "I wanted to try a course using television."

- Participants found the registration process for the Academies very simple.

- Most of the participants heard about the Academies from promos aired on the TVOntario network.

- The overwhelming majority, around 90% of respondents, enjoyed receiving the computer-generated letters, considering that the comments were helpful and that they related directly to their needs and interests; the majority was satisfied with the language and the writing style of the letters; they considered that the responses stimulated reflection and discussion of the television programs.

- When asked to evaluate each of the components of the Academies, nearly 90% of respondents considered the main components of the Academies: the television programs, the learning guide, the questionnaire sets, and the computer-generated responses as "very useful" or "somewhat useful."

- Asked whether they were, in general, satisfied with their Academy experience, the results for both Academies were very similar: in the Health and Environment Academy, 60% were very satisified and 30% were somewhat satisfied, and for the Music of Man Academy, 45% were very satisfied, and 39% were somewhat satisfied.

Some Conclusions

The first two Academies were introduced as a strictly experimental venture. The fact that, despite the newness of the proposition, a relatively short preparation period, and a minimal promotion effort, they attracted over 700 individuals from across the Province as paying participants, leads to believe that this mode of informal learning has a considerable potential. The type of contact and rapport which established itself between the Academies and a substantial proportion of the participants strongly confirms the viability of the project and its method, and the significant meaning it has for many people.

One of the most important results is the development of a new type of courseware. This new educational design encourages a systematic effort by the learner, to be spread over a number of weeks; it provides guidance and pacing; feeds and enriches the learning process. And most importantly, it gives the lonely learner -- and most home learners are usually lonely -- a desirable channel for expressing himself. We have now strong evidence that a substantial portion of the Academy participants understand the opportunities which the system provides, and that they take full advantage of them.

The numerous comments, even those criticizing certain aspects of the Academies, express acceptance and appreciation. The individualization of the replies is easily recognized by participants and appreciated by them.

The Academies are, in our conditions, a significant achievement in two important respects. Firstly, they are successful examples of the educational and

instructional capabilities of television broadcasting; in both Academies the broadcasts were the main stimulus for the learning projects which people undertook, and a significant part of the resource material. Secondly, the Academies are a form of truly interactive television which is being made available without capital investments in hardware by both the broadcaster and the viewer. Interaction does not always need immediacy, as we are well proving it with the Academy projects.

Further plans of the Academy include a 12-week Parents' Academy which will begin in January 1981. Preparatory work is being carried out on projects which will deal with technology for non-technologists, and with moral choices in contemporary society. For the more distant future, we are considering projects on personal communications, and the modern Middle East.